

GOOD VITIS™

SPECIAL EDITION . , CALIFORNIA GRAPES



Spring/Summer 2024

Special Edition: California Grapes

This spring, one of my best friends and I spent 10 days in California. The trip was almost entirely about tasting great wine, but we also spent a few days hiking. We visited wineries in Napa Valley and Sonoma County as well as the Santa Lucia Highlands. In those ten days we drove more than 1,200 miles. The itinerary was full of high quality producers, and helped me check one winery off my bucket list: Diamond Creek. We spent time with old friends and made some new ones.

As you're about to read, the trip was a success. It also solidified my belief that *terroir* is more than nature's influence on wine. You'll read about that if you muscle through this entire report (or skip to it).

Two important notes to make. The first is that there are no scores for wines covered in this report. This is because my focus was on experiencing for myself and capturing for readers the essence of each winery I felt while visiting. This takes more attention and thought

than one might expect (at least for me). I do, however, provide honest opinions, recommendations, and suggested aging data points. Thankfully, there's only one wine covered which I don't recommend spending money on, and uncoincidentally it comes from the fire-plagued 2020 vintage.

The second note is on the buddy comedy/adventure images included in this report. My trip companion and I go back to high school, and lived together in college. We've spent time together in Spain, England, France, Israel, Jordan, the Republic of Georgia, as well as all over the USA, including driving across it twice. We know how to have fun together, and on that note the images are inspired by our relationship.

-Aaron Menenberg, Good Vitis Editor-in-Chief



Hey, you guys ready to let the grapes out?

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The Santa

Lucia Highlands

“The Santa Lucia [Mountains] stood up against the sky to the west and kept the valley from the open sea, and they were dark and brooding—unfriendly and dangerous. I always found in myself a dread of west and a love of east. Where I ever got such an idea I cannot say, unless it could be that the morning came over the peaks of the Gabilans and the night drifted back from the ridges of the Santa Lucias. It may be that the birth and death of the day had some part in my feeling about the two ranges of mountains.” - John Steinbeck



This is not the description winemakers in the Santa Lucia Highlands, or the SLH, would be looking for from native son John Steinbeck: Unfriendly and dangerous. My recent experience visiting the SLH inspired sensations quite different from these. If I had to pull anything from Steinbeck's experience, it would be that the SLH's wines are dark beasts in the wine bliss depth sense, that perhaps the sun arriving at the vineyards at the start of the day as it comes over the Gabilan Mountains help to awaken them for the serious work they put in that the sun, eventually setting over them, helps to nurture. One thing is for sure: The wines of the SLH are rich and profoundly of a very specific place.

I have become well acquainted with a few special wines from the SLH American Viticultural Area (AVA) since starting Good Vitis. For almost as long as I've enjoyed these wines, I have tried to organize a visit. It's not the most convenient wine region to attend given its distance from major airports and the absence, more or less, of standard wine region amenities like hotels and restaurants. While a relatively many American wine lovers can speak to the Napa Valley or Sonoma County from personal experience, few can do so of the SLH.

Through occasional remote winemaker interviews

and my many tastings of Clarice Wine Company and Beau Marchais pinot noirs and recent tasting of ROAR pinots and chardonnay (all made from some of the most famed SLH vineyards), I began to get the sense that applying the goal of Good Vitis, to ever expand my own and my readers' wine knowledge, to the SLH necessitated a visit. As the pilgrimage proved, all the interviews and samples and meditations are simply not enough to enable the understanding and fair convenance of the sense of place and people that birth these wines.

Like any wine region, geography matters. I find this to be especially true of the SLH having now experienced it first-hand. All regions have topography, but few are as stark or stunning as the SLH. Most regions have weather eccentricities, but few are as dynamic as the SLH. And most regions have unique combinations of topography and weather, but few are as complicated as the SLH. It's this combination of topography and weather along with the region's relative remoteness that sets the stage for a group of dedicated winemakers and grape growers to offer something special.

The Topography

The SLH is part of the Salinas Valley, which is known 10

as the salad bowl of the world and is the setting for several Steinbeck stories. For many sections of the drive along Highway 101 that runs north-south through it, lettuce crops cover the valley floor. Eventually, when we got up onto the hillsides and looked down on the lettuce fields, it appeared as if the soil had been needlepointed with leafy greens.

Entering the Valley from the north on the 101, looking up into the mostly bare green hills above the valley floor, a land-before-time sensation entered my mind where it has set up a permanent association with the words "Santa Lucia Highlands."

Between the lettuce valley floor and the emerald-y-shamrock-y upholstered mountains, the whole valley gives off a sense of magical lushness untouched by humans. Granted, we'd arrived during a pause from what had been an very wet period, and that surely had contributed to the Jurassic era vibes. But even still, and despite the agricultural workers in the fields and the pavement on which we drove, I don't think a Spinosaurus drinking from the Salinas River would have surprised me much had it appeared on the other side of an upcoming bend.

Per Steinbeck's description, on the eastern side of the valley is the Gabilan Range and on the western



Previous page: Miner's Lettuce growing on the Pisoni estate.

side the Santa Lucia Mountains, the latter being the site of the SLH appellation. The SLH constitutes a 18-mile long portion of the Santa Lucia Mountains that starts on top of a bench on the western side of River Road, which parallels Highway 101 and follows the Salinas River, and heads up onto the slopes.

There are vineyards nearby that are not part of the SLH AVA. They include Arroyo Secco, Carmel Valley, Chelone, Hames Valley, Monterey, San Antonio Valley, San Bernabe, and San Lucas. Some of these are visible from the SLH, and all are part of the larger Monterey growing region, which cumulatively has over 43,000 acres of vines. The SLH is a small portion contributing 5,750 planted acres.

The Weather

There is significant temperature change from south to north in the SLH, as well as from the lower bench, which sits at around 40 feet above sea level, to the upper reaches of the AVA that push a few hundred feet north of 2,000 feet above sea level. We saw this undulation in the variable bud break development we observed from north to south and from low to high elevation as we worked our through the valley.

With temperature, a popular descriptor among the wine folk that we experienced ourselves is “a degree a mile, from hotter in the south to cooler in the north.” With 18 miles of AVA and an intra-AVA elevation change of as much as 2000 feet, there is a massive range of growing season conditions on vineyard-by-vineyard and block-by-block bases.

The most noticeable climatic aspect of the SLH for me, however, is wind, which enters at the northern end of the Valley as it comes off the Pacific Ocean, and rips southward beyond the edge of the SLH. The wind is notable not just because of its velocity and its routineness (nearly everyone used the same time, noon, in describing when it arrived every single day like clockwork), but also because of its cool temperature. The wind picks up

That said, temperatures in the SLH are not notably hot, and by American wine standards the SLH is considered a cool(ish) climate growing region. It picks over the Monterey Bay, which is one of North America’s deepest underwater canyons rivaling the Grand Canyon in size. This makes the water quite cold, and the wind in turn picks up that coolness before setting off down the Salinas Valley. Average speeds of 15 miles per hour are routine, as are gusts exceeding 25 mph.

In the vineyards, these winds can save young buds during cold spells and help dry vines out before mildew sets in during particularly wet periods. However, if strong gusts are plentiful when buds are young and vulnerable, they can do damage.

Wind can also deliver hot or cold air. If wind moderates temperature, as it often does in the SLH, it slows sugar ripening, giving grapes more time to develop the compounds that turn into aromas and flavors in wines. It also gives the stems, seeds, and skins time to develop complexity so long as there are sufficient temperatures to coax that kind of maturation. And when sufficient ripening does occur, the wines can show up with especially big personalities.

The SLH doesn't experience much rain, which means that while for many an SLH producer the principle standard is dry farming, drip irrigation tubing is hung through most vineyards in case a season is particularly dry; it wasn't uncommon to hear that the irrigation hadn't been turned on in several years, but is occasionally used. Add this to the temperature variance and strong winds, and it becomes a little more clear why SLH wines have their unique climatic character.

The Remoteness

The Salinas Valley has always been a center for agriculture, which is land-intensive and doesn't require much of a population. The largest city is Salinas, which is home to 160,000 mostly local laborers, business owners, and their families. It's not exactly the hub you'd expect for a California wine region, and it isn't one. The closest thing to a hub is the adjacent cities of Carmel and Carmel-By-The-Sea. Located on the coast north of the Salinas Valley, they're about an hour from the top end of the SLH and offer the full range of accommodations, food, and attractions. Most wine-seeking tourists are likely to be more comfortable there than in Salinas, for better or worse.

The SLH's remoteness contributes to that land-before-time feeling I got when visiting. Because population density isn't really a thing in the SLH AVA, and there isn't a lot of infrastructure in or around it, the local wine tourism isn't much to write home about. There are a few wineries with tasting rooms in the SLH, but some don't offer tastings at all while others put their tasting rooms in Carmel or Carmel-By-The-Sea. Visiting the SLH takes homework, planning, and time, but is worth it for

those seeking new wine adventures.

The unique dynamics of the SLH allow wineries to be as insular as they want. It means they can spend less time and resources on visitors and more time and resources on vineyards and winemaking (as well as requiring more marketing to sell their wares). This doesn't guarantee better wine, but it does make it more likely that the wines are based on origin. Our itinerary was a list of wineries that not only focus on reflecting the place, but also recognize the challenge it takes to succeed and have accordingly adopted mindsets that are enabling them to do so. They included: Morgan, McIntyer, Caraccioli, Pisoni, Francioni/ROAR, Odonata, and Joyce.

Readers who want to seek out SLH wines are encouraged to include those covered in this report on their shopping list. Prospective SLH trips benefit from consulting the SLH Wine Artisans, which is the trade association for the AVA and a good information resource. They can be found at santaluciahighlands.com. They helped organize our visit, and I am grateful to them for their assistance.

Now, let's get on with the wine...

Caraccioli Cellars



From Double L we drove back down into the valley to the small city of Gonzales where we met Caraccioli Cellars owner and winemaker Scott Caraccioli at his production facility.

Caraccioli is a family affair founded in 2006 based on a single 124 acre estate vineyard called Escolle planted in 2008. It's a winery, frankly, that far more people should know exists. As Josh Reynolds has said, they produce some of America's best sparkling wine. I can now confirm this badge is well-deserved.

When we rolled in, pleasantries were exchanged over a fast-paced tank sample extravaganza. Scott hustles like a dad with a son who plays hyper competitive soccer would. Perpetual motion describes our first fifteen minutes together racing from tank to tank, sipping and spitting, sipping and spitting.

I never say 'no' to tank or barrel samples because they are interesting mostly because you get to see the mannerisms of a winemaker in action, but I don't seek them out because they don't say anything informative about what the finished wine will achieve - and that's what matters to those of us who pay for them. I also don't ever publish scores based on barrel samples, and frankly I judge those who do

because consumers should not make decisions based on unfinished wine notes. A lot can and should change from aging vessel to bottle. So, I was thankful when we turned the final corner and there was a table set up with finished wines. Scott sat down opposite us, and the pace slowed as we got down to proper business over civilized wine.

Scott's mentor was the late famed Michel Salgues, who knew more than a lot about sparkling wine. Salgues spent twenty years with Roederer Estate in the Anderson Valley where he helped establish the winery and, in many ways, the region as a wine-producing one. This means he played a critical role in developing and advancing the sparkling wine category in America. We're not exactly known for our sparklers, and that's for good reason, but it's impossible to talk about American sparkling wine without giving credit to the brilliance that is Roederer Estate's L'Ermitage, which could be argued is the bar-setter for American sparkling wine on a large production scale.

Salgue was not just a winemaker, but a vigneron in the traditional sense that his knowledge of viticulture was, I'm told, quite something. He left Roederer in 2004, and was with the Caracciolis when they started their winery in 2006. He was there to

help with the management of Escolle, and that assuredly paid dividends when it came to building the winemaking program because the two could be integrated along their respective development paths.

The Caraccioli facility is an old asparagus processing plant, and was well suited to be used for wine production: It's large space is filled with tanks of various size and material, and is a good reminder that many in the SLH wine business come from families who had been, or continue to be, involved in other agricultural business in the valley.

Several proprietors we met on the trip grow produce staples like lettuce and asparagus as well as wine grapes. In fact, many of the multi-generational wine producers in the SLH started with other produce and added wine grapes to the mix later on.

This dynamic contributes to the unique feel of the SLH wine industry because it means growers think about their vineyards as part of a larger agricultural pursuit that further grounds them in the local culture and economy. It also creates a feel for wine-loving visitors that is very different from the more monolithic areas of Napa and Sonoma north of the SLH where wine is the sole focus and

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therefore dominates the culture and dictates the amenities.

Getting back to Caracioli, the partnership with Salgues was secured with Scott's agreement to Michel's three no's (particular to Caracioli): No non-vintage wines, no pinot meunier, and no 375 milliliter bottles. These could easily come off a snobbish, but there is good reason for them. As an example, with the banning of NV's, "you have to create a house style [for NV], and we can't grow enough grapes to do that consistently from year-to-year," Scott explained. Instead, the focus is on highlighting the vintage variation of "California's sunshine" in "Champagne's structure," the latter a reference to the traditional Champagne method used at Carracioli for its sparkling wines.

That's a hard lift, especially since defining Champagne's structure can be a challenge. I would argue that there are more factors that determine a sparkling wine's structure than any other type of wine because there are more steps and decision points, like tirage, extended lees aging, riddling, disgorging, and dosage liquor. There just aren't any *terroirs* outside Champagne that can come out of that process as elegantly. This is why it's important that Scott adds the California flare; it's not just a

marketing line or a winemaking challenge, but also an acknowledgement of reality. This will turn a lot of Champagne purists off, but it should not; I cannot remember an sparkling wine outside of Champagne that reminds me as much of Champagne's structure as Caraccioli does. It does not taste like Champagne, but then that's not the point. It is Scott's best foot forward in *Méthode Champenoise* with SLH fruit.

There's one more thing I should say about Scott that comes through in the glass: If he was born in France, he'd be a grower Champagne producer. Don't get me wrong, there's very little French about him. What I mean is that he's fanatical. Champagne method winemaking is inordinately technical, takes saintly patience, and because of those two things requires incredible precision, granular attention to detail, and the commitment of a lifetime. It's a combination of personality traits that most of us just don't have. Scott does, and it shows in the wines.

The ripping acid we tasted first in the tank samples of future release base wines, or *vin clairs*, prepared us for our tasting of a trio of current releases: The 2018 Brut Cuvée, Blanc de Noirs, and Brut Rosé. Despite the significant bottle aging prior to release,

these wines still ripped in a way that suggests long-term aging could be rewarded.

I found the Brut Rosé the easiest to drink and the Blanc de Noirs more acidic than I prefer, but then I'm a Bérèche style fan that prefers a more modest level of acid and fuller bodied achieved through lees agitation and a *dosage* liquor that supports that profile. This doesn't mean neither were good - they are both very good, but the *crème de le crème* of the trio was the Brut Cuvée, which showed an elegance I've not found in any American sparkling wine except for L'Ermitage.

The influence of the pinot noir in these three wines is quite evident through the bounty of red fruits they all offer. With Caraccioli's Escolle vineyard sitting towards the cooler northern end of the SLH, a location that Scott noted allows them to "do this style of [sparkling] pinot noir," adding that "we can make sparkling at 13 brix," which is shorthand for high acid, serious minerality wine that expresses the varietal's delicate red fruit.

The Brut Rosé is ready right now, but for a palate like mine the Blanc de Noirs needs time for the acidic edge to smooth a bit and the palate to fill out. The Brut Cuvée is more approachable now than 25

the Blanc de Noirs, but it also shows the most potential for upside with aging.

My biggest dose of sparkling wine snobby is reserved for the mousse, which is the collection of bubbles on the surface of the wine, in the glass, that first touch your tongue when you take a sip. You can move the mousse around in your mouth before swallowing to get a sense of its construction and how well it can coat the palate. I find the minerality of the wine can be enjoyed in it as well. There should be a noticeable physical sensation associated with it, something you can't miss, usually delivered through its texture and density, but it shouldn't overwhelm any other element of the wine. The mousse on all three were good, but the Brut Cuvée's mousse was exceptional. I can still taste and feel it.

At some point in our conversation, Scott was passed a bottle of the 2012 Brut Rosé to demonstrate just how good his sparkling wines are. This is supposed to be the most approachable of Caraccioli's sparkling wines (there are more than what we tried), in most years, so a 2012 that's doing well would be a statement. Doing well turned out to be an understatement.

It remains a racy wine, but has developed tertiary

traits of pinot noir - think fungly forest floor, etc. - that perform really well on a bigger, rounder, and creamier structure than currently exists in the 2018. The mousse was fine, dense, and had a bit of sweet umami on it. The backend showed some delicious nuttiness, which is something I love on older sparkling wine. If you get a chance to try this one, don't miss it.

We also tried a trio of still red wines: The 2021 pinot noir and syrah and the 2022 gamay. The latter is an interesting compilation of $\frac{1}{3}$ carbonically produced wine, $\frac{1}{3}$ concrete aged, and $\frac{1}{3}$ steel aged with 25% whole cluster production. It's weightier than I expected and Moulin á vent-esque in flavor profile. The pinot was tasty as well, but the syrah was my favorite of the three. It was plush, elegant, and refined, and showed a nice amount of savory elements.

I'd say it's entirely understandable to come to Caraccioli for the red wine, but I'd put money on people staying for the sparklers. That's where Scott's fanaticism shows through the clearest and most profoundly. No line up of American sparkling wine is complete, or as good, without the inclusion of Caraccioli Brut Cuvée.

Summing The SLH Up



Previous page: A Pisoni vineyard block.

The SLH is a challenging region to categorize, package, wrap, affix with a bow and ribbon, and send off for the Instagram influencer unboxing post. The SLH is basically one big hillside farmed by a combination of founding multigenerational families and young experimental start ups. If that sounds simple, it is not; it is a mighty diverse hillside happy to be made in the numerous styles that reflect the big personalities defining what it means to be an SLH wine.

While the SLH is not simple, it is not particularly complicated either: It is a single hillside making mostly pinot noir and chardonnay. This is no knock. Buried within the AVA - and within blocks of single vineyards - are a multitude of microclimates. Burgundy is a bunch of distinct vineyard blocks and makes mostly pinot noir and chardonnay, too. The more accurate and appropriate term for the SLH (and Burgundy) is “complex.”

Like Burgundy, the best way to understand the SLH is to methodically taste location by location and producer by producer, working your way up and down the mountainside as you move from one end of the AVA to other. Where a vine is located within

the AVA says a lot about how it's going to be different from vines in other locations in the same AVA, and of course who makes a wine will determine its final expression. Learning all of that takes logistics, time, and dedication, but if you are paying attention, your return on investment can be high.

Whether you visit the SLH or source its wine remotely, the wineries covered in this report represent a fantastic survey of the SLH. I'd add Clarice Wine Company and Rombauer's SLH pinot noir to the list as well as the latter's forthcoming Gary's Vineyard pinot noir. A nice selection across these wineries would provide the region more than a fair shake.

And if you want to give the SLH the fairest shake, include several syrahs as there may be no more rewarding American wine region for syrah lovers, and that's with keeping Washington State in mind.



Terroir

Note: Everyone I mention in this section is in my life because of our mutual love for wine and all that it encapsulates. As I wrote in the 2024 Riesling Special Edition:

I admire wine's ability to bring people together. Not through inebriation, but rather by the way it stops you mid-thought, refocuses your mind on the present moment, and inspires you to look across the table and connect with the other person over the shared experience. Once that happens, your time together is likely to be more meaningful and memorable. A bond is formed.



No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the wine, take the ride...and if the tannin occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well...maybe chalk it up to forced consciousness expansion: Tune in, freak out, get beaten.



Previous page: Myself with Stu Smith (Smith-Madrone) and my friend, Jesse. I'm holding a birth year 1983 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon.

I believe in the concept of *terroir*, which is a French term for how the particular climate, soil, and terrain of a region affect the structure, aroma, and flavor of wine. I say “believe” but science has thus far been unable to prove its reality. Yet, the wine profession by-and-large has fully bought in. *Terroir*-specific winemaking, which is something touted by every winery in this *California Grapes Special Edition* and well beyond, pursues a process that attempts to avoid altering and/or accentuate the *terroir's* particular characteristics in each wine.

Terroir is the main driver behind the practice of legally defining specific areas of wine grape growing. In the US we call these regions American Viticultural Areas, or AVAs, and they require an application to and approval by the federal government. In my experience, most of the time these regions are sufficiently different from others in terms of *terroir* characteristics that their unique distinction makes sense.

As winemaking has proliferated around the world, I'd argue that the average quality of wine is better

than it's ever been in my drinking lifetime, even if there has also been a homogenization of some styles (which many would attribute to Robert Parker and the wider wine media). This burden of plenty creates a challenge for which us wine lovers are very fortunate: How do we choose among the numerous high quality wines to purchase?

Increasingly, the customer's guide to answering that question is 'what's their story?', meaning, 'I'd like to understand not just the *terroir*, but also the particulars of winemaker's role in harnessing it.' Often, a winery's ethos is also considered. Providing information to answer these questions is the main purpose of *Good Vitis*.

Over the years I've come to realize that there is more to wine than vineyards and crush pads and tanks and cellars. It may seem obvious, but those sacred places and things, left to themselves, don't complete the personality on a wine - it is how people animate them that ultimately determines how people experience the wine.

Good wine can come from great grapes and average winemakers. Great wine only comes from great winemakers, even if they only have good grapes. We can't help but manipulate *terroir* at least



a little simply by doing the bare minimum in the winemaking process. And, we should hope for masterful manipulation, regardless of what entails, because that is how we end up with the best wine.

So, the recipe for great wine is great *terroir* and great human intervention and manipulation (to whatever extent the situation determines). Yet when most in the industry talk of *terroir*-driven wine as the gold standard, they are often purposefully implying that human intervention and manipulation reduces the ultimate impressiveness of the wine. The issue with this presentation is that while *terroir* is presented as the determining factor of a wine, equally if not more determinant is the ethos of the people who manage those natural influences. A more complete vision of *terroir*, then, has to include the human element.

The greatest pleasure and privilege of writing *Good Vitis* is I have an excuse to spend time with the people who grow grapes and make and promote wine. They educate me, they inspire me, and some of them have stuck in my life and become good friends. It is these experiences that have led me to the conclusion that *terroir* is human.

When I think back on our visit to Smith-Madrone on 38

this trip, I don't think first about the incredible 1988 Smith-Madrone Cabernet Sauvignon that we had the privilege of consuming. My first memory is descending into the winery's cellar with Stu Smith on a mission to find a few good old bottles to pull. Our mutual excitement combined with the room that opened up at the bottom of the stairs to reveal the autobiography of the Smith brothers' lives' work was a heart-touching and heartwarming moment.

I've known Stu for eight years, spending time with him in Washington, DC, where I used to live, and in Napa both at his winery and his home. We've shared many a bottle together over a big range of conversation. We've spent a few hours driving around his property several times on his ATV, and shared meals at several locations around the estate. I think we've probably spent several factors more time talking about forest management than vineyard management, and we've dedicated far more time talking about local and national politics and the wine industry than Stu's winemaking approach.

I like Stu more than I like his wines, and I like his wines a lot. I like his wine most when I drink it with him. But regardless of whether I'm pulling the cork with or without him, I'm experiencing an intimate



Previous page: Sneak peaking the 2022 Rombauer Santa Lucia Highlands pinot noir with Rombauer consulting winemaker Adam Lee and David Zinni, National Sales Manager for Miramar Estate.

expression of who he and his brother are as people. While I'd be curious what another Napa cab winemaker would do with a Smith-Madrone's Cook's Flat Vineyard harvest, even if they meticulously followed the Smith brothers' recipe, the experience of drinking that wine would be different for me. The Brothers Smith planted that vineyard decades ago; they are its parent and as such it and its bounty behave certain ways unique to their rearing.

If you find this vision of *terroir* overly romantic or, perhaps like the science surrounding the concept of *terroir*, unbelievable because it's unproven, let me point you to the example of making a beloved grandmother's recipe. It's not exactly a one-to-one comparison because, unlike the Cook's Flat Vineyard one, ingredients can vary. However, like any good relative of a grandparent, you know that even with the best of ingredients you'll always be lacking that one irreplaceable one: Grandma's love.

This doesn't mean the new wine would not or could not be as good. Rather, it means that it will be

THE COUNCIL
SANTA LUCIA HIGHLANDS

Pinot Noir

VINTAGE 2019

Rosella's Vineyard 34%
Garys' Vineyard 34%
Pisoni Vineyard 32%

THE COUNCIL

The Council was created in July of 2005 in the caves at Pisoni vineyard. The resulting wine within this bottle represents the collective efforts of James Varner, Jerry Yang, Kyle Ditzler, Paul Brown, Bob Varner, Kevin Sawyer, Gary Pisoni and Gary Francioni. The Pisoni clone Pinot Noir from separate lots of Rosella's, Garys' and Pisoni Vineyards were blended in proportions determined by The Council to allow each vineyard to express its distinct personality.



124 cases produced

ALCOHOL 14.2% BY VOLUME

Previous two pages: A bottle of The Council we enjoyed on the trip.

different. And that's exactly my point: The human element is every bit a part of a wine's DNA as the natural ones. *Terroir* is inherently and vibrantly human, and the exclusion of the human element obscures the existence and importance of a hugely determinant factor of wine.

A fantastic case study for this is the Santa Lucia Highlands (SLH), which has been profiled in this *Good Vitis* issue. As I discussed there, the SLH has a handful of what many would describe as the AVA's grand cru vineyards. Most of them exist in this world because of one, or both, of two families: the Pisonis and the Francionis.

For or a variety of reasons, a relative many wineries get to make wines from this small set of vineyards. Pick any vintage and line up several wineries' Gary's Vineyard or Rosella's Vineyard pinot noirs and you'll get an equal number of divergent wines. In this scenario, because these are growers who prize both quality and customer service, many grape buyers get to set their pick dates, and that means there will be differences in chemistry between the sets of raw materials. This is just one of numerous human

elements involved in the winemaking process.

The person who introduced me to the SLH was Adam Lee, co-founder of Siduri Winery who, after selling it to Jackson Family Wines, started a winery called Clarice Wine Company that makes three different SLH pinot noirs each vintage. He's extremely close with the family of SLH producers and growers, and intimately involved in the trade association group that represents the AVA. He also consults for a number of wineries, some of whom purchase SLH fruit.

The Clarice pinot noirs are extremely good wines. Each year's release includes single vineyard designates from Gary's and Rosella's Vineyards and an SLH AVA blend. In each of the vintages I've tried, I've preferred the Gary's to the Rosella's four out of five times. The one year when that wasn't true was the same year that I found the same preference between those two vineyard designate expressions made by the Franscioni's ROAR winery. Yet the Clarice and ROAR wines from the same vintages and vineyards are very different wines. I'd wager that many sommeliers presented with the 2021 Clarice and ROAR Gary's and Rosella's pinots would have a hard time pairing them appropriately based on vineyard, let alone call their vineyard or even AVA



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PN 114

Previous page: One of Morét Brealynn's rows of pinot noir at Lakeview Vineyard.

among a wider selection of even just California pinots from the same vintage.

You could argue that I'm right for different reasons. I could see many argue that this result would occur because the SLH is not a widely studied AVA among sommeliers, and that would be true if I had not limited my hypothetical to a comparison of two vineyards produced by two wineries. Reading this, Gary Francioni and Adam Lee might point out that their respective blocks produce different chemistry and that their irrigation regimes were different and that their pick dates were different (I know all of these things to be true). But, I'd wager that they'd agree that these differences only exist because of the human element.

To appropriate a James Blunt quote from his *Top Gear* appearance, winemakers "are like arseholes, everyone has one." There's a small vineyard in Sonoma County called Lakeview. A number of wineries source from it, but only Morét Brealynn is using it to make a vineyard designate wine. The inaugural release in 2021 came ripping out of the gates, but in 2022 Morét produced something truly

special, one of the best American pinots I've ever had.

Unlike the Gary's and Rosella's, it has no comparison because, as I said, Morét is the only one doing a vineyard designate. And that, in its own way, is a statement about human *terroir*. While rows and blocks within a vineyard can differ, with a vineyard as small as Lakeview, it still takes the attention and dedication of the people working it to turn it into a wine worthy of its own bottling. If I'm Jeff Mangahas at Williams-Selyem, and I'm looking for a new vineyard, and I'm tasting Morét's Lakeview, I'm inquiring about getting my own rows.

Another winemaker whose talents I've come to greatly respect is Elizabeth Vianna, head winemaker at Chimney Rock Winery since 2005. Located in the Stag's Leap AVA and farming 28 blocks on 119 acres of estate vineyards, Chimney Rock is one of Napa's cabernet producers that best demonstrate the veracity of my concept of *terroir*; there are many Stags Leaps cabs out there, but Chimney Rock distinguishes itself in a blind line up of its peers. This is because different growing circumstances do not equal different wines without a highly skilled human touch, and that is exactly what winemaker Elizabeth and her team bring to the winery.

Chimney Rock

STAGS LEAP DISTRICT
NAPA VALLEY



CABERNET SAUVIGNON
VINEYARDS: Clone 4, Midas, Ganymede, White Pebble, Tomahawk, South Hill Alpine, Cardiac Hill Clone 7



MERLOT
VINEYARDS: North Hill, Pegasus



PETIT VERDOT
VINEYARDS: Elevation, Canyon



FIANO
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc (A Single Row)



CABERNET FRANC
VINEYARDS: Cabernet Franc

Over the last year I've had the pleasure of tasting wines from across Chimney Rock's vineyards, some of them with Elizabeth. Each one embraces the natural power and acidity of Stags Leap while achieving refinement and elegance rarely seen in American wine. Most Napa winemakers would be lucky to occasionally achieve the Chimney Rock profile that Elizabeth and her team have made routine more than a few times in their careers, although the current release 2021 vintage seems to be extra special.

Watching contestants of Netflix show Barbeque Showdown react when they arrive at the "barbeque compound" in episode 1 of each season reminds me of how Elizabeth talks about Chimney Rock's vineyards: There are so many great things to play with in the pursuit of making the best product possible. The vineyard map on the previous page, courtesy of Chimney Rock, will give you a visual of one version of a winemaker's paradise playground.

Elizabeth geeks out in the pursuit of figuring out how to maximize the potential of each vineyard, of each block, each varietal, and each clone, every vintage. Equally, she geeks out talking about and tasting the differences and finding out which single vineyard wines people prefer.



In the fall of 2023, Chimney Rock sent me a preview of some of its 2021 releases pulled from the southern end of the property. On this trip, Elizabeth and Megghan Driscoll, VP of Communications at parent company Terlato Wines, brought a selection of 2021s from the northern part of the property to dinner.

Even though it wasn't present at dinner, I had to tell Elizabeth that one of my absolute favorite white wines in the world is Chimney Rock's Elevage Blanc, which is a blend of sauvignon blanc and sauvignon gris. I've had them with as much as twelve years of age, and am convinced the wine is both one of America's most under-the-radar white wines as well as one of its very best. As part of the 2021 vintage release, it continues that streak.

Elizabeth was keen to find out how I thought the northern end Ganymede Vineyard cabernet sauvignon compared to the southern end Tomahawk cabernet sauvignon. Representing two of the winery's flagship single vineyard cabernets, Elizabeth said that most people have a preference they hang on to. While both are outstanding, determine a preference was easy for me: It's the Tomahawk, I told her. The first sip of the 2021 brought deafening silence to my world, and I don't remember the last time I was so sad to finish a

bottle.

I have also never had an American Bordeaux-style blend that reminded me so much of old school Bordeaux as the 2021 Elevage rouge, which in this vintage is comprised of 55% merlot, 29% cabernet sauvignon, 14% petit verdot, and 3% malbec. It's a particular blend that, when made as it has been, can only be downgraded from a perfect critique because of its youth. I'd rather judge a wine at its peak, and like the Tomahawk I imagine both could have a run-in with perfection.

What I love so much about the Elevage Blanc, Rouge, and Tomahawk is that they give you the best of Stags Leap while reminding you so clearly of the old world style of Bordeaux that no longer exists, really, even in Bordeaux. They are a fusion of Stags Leap and early 1980s Bordeaux in the best way possible, and that makes them stand out so clearly from other Stags Leaps wines.

Certainly a bit of nature plays a role, but Elizabeth's nearly 20 years of experience with this plot of land has helped her refine and hone in on how to get the most from the vines. I've had numerous winemakers tell me how long they think it takes to really learn a vineyard, and it's always a double-digit number. This

makes it all the more important to recognize the irreplaceable and very perceptible role that humans play in *terroir*-driven wine. Chimney Rock is proof.

As I said at the head of this article, I admire wine's ability to bring people together. What I did not say then is that a major reason that I believe wine does this is because it is made by humans as an interpretation of something we can all see, smell, touch, and taste. It's not all that different to me than painting: Grapes, instead of paint, is the raw material and a winery, instead of a canvas, is the place where it is created. Some artists prize certain paints because of their ingredients, as do winemakers with vineyard sourcing.

Art is in the eye of the beholder just as wine is in the palate of the drinker. Yet, we don't place the origin of the paint at the center of the discussion like we do *terroir*. And in doing that, we miss an incredibly important part of wine appreciation.

You gotta approach every day as if it's Open That Bottle Night.





